

The Media's Coverage of Domestic Terrorism

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Scholarly interest in terrorism has grown dramatically since September 11. One important line of inquiry within this body of research has been the media's coverage of terrorism. Although there have been several important studies published on this topic, there has been little research examining media coverage of domestic terrorism. This study fills this gap by examining the media's coverage of terrorism in the United States from 1980 until September 10, 2001. The analysis is based on a list of terrorist-related incidents and *New York Times* articles pertaining to each incident. This study documents the amount and type of coverage received by domestic terrorism incidents, and identifies the variables influencing whether an incident is covered and how much space it receives. The results indicate that most terrorism incidents receive little or no coverage in the news, but a few cases are sensationalized in the press. There are several characteristics that consistently explain which incidents are covered and receive substantial news space. Incidents with casualties, linked to domestic terrorist groups, targeting airlines, or when hijacking is used as a tactic are significantly more likely to be covered and have more articles and words written about them. This study concludes with a discussion of the policy implications of these findings for the understanding of terrorism as a social problem.

Keywords Media Coverage; Domestic Terrorism; September 11

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Introduction

The September 11 attacks on America continue to impact important social, political, cultural, and legal issues. The primary way that the public has come to understand the attacks is through the consumption of an overwhelming and steady diet of images, ideas, and explanations provided through various media outlets. It is axiomatic to state that these attacks were an important media event. In fact, several factors combined to make terrorism on September 11 one of the most important news events in history. Some of these reasons include:

- *Media Accessibility.* The current structure and shared distribution of media technology guaranteed immediate and unfettered access to this event. Photographs, video, and personal accounts were accessed throughout the world instantaneously. The public watched the planes striking the World Trade Center towers over and over again and saw their horrifying collapse.
- *News Values.* Terrorism generally and the September 11 attacks specifically are consistent with journalistic conventions regarding news values outlined in Galtung and Ruge's (1965) classic study (see also Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Weimann & Winn, 1994). The event was violent, intense, unambiguous, unexpected, rare, and hostile to elite people and/or nations.
- *Fear.* The attacks occurred on American soil against the only remaining superpower. Although other attacks have occurred within the United States, none of this magnitude had ever occurred, and thus the nation was consumed with uncontrollable feelings of fear and vulnerability.
- *Media Frames.* Moral boundaries, understandings of good and evil, and the structure of institutional power have been changed because of the events. Heroes (firefighters, law enforcement, passengers on Flight 93), villains (Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, the Taliban), and sympathetic victims (survivors and loved ones that died) were weaved into the major frames used to describe what happened and what should be done about the attacks. There was no doubt that America "would never be the same" after September 11. Terrorism was a social problem in need of a response.

Scholars responded quickly, producing an impressive number of studies that dissected how various media covered the events and aftermath of September 11.¹ As terrorism remains an important social problem, new terrorist acts, related terrorism stories, and efforts to respond to terrorism are newsworthy. The post-September 11 representations of terrorism documented by researchers are however directly linked to a long history of terrorism being an important news topic. Although the event may have been unlike anything ever experienced in the past, journalists have had to report on other major terrorism crisis events.

1. For example, see Abu-Lughood (2002), Altheide (2004), Bligh, Kohles, and Meindl (2004), Burney (2002), Chermak, Bailey, and Brown (2003), Entman (2003), Hutcheson, Domke, Billeaudeau, and Garland (2004), Nacos (2003a, 2003b), Reynolds and Barrett (2003), and Wright (2002).

On September 11, reporters quickly came to define what was happening as a terrorist event and understood that a well-known terrorist was probably the mastermind responsible for the action. These understandings were available to reporters as similar explanations were provided in coverage of other significant events in the 1990s (e.g., the 1993 World Trade Center attack, the Oklahoma City bombing). Previous coverage of terrorism provided a useful foundation for presenting, investigating, and researching terrorism post-September 11. Although there is a large body of research on the presentation of terrorism in the news post-September 11 and of international terrorism occurring abroad, very few studies have actually explored the selection and prominence decisions made by media workers in covering terrorism incidents that have occurred in the United States prior to 2001. This study fills this gap and thus provides an introduction to the media decision-making frameworks in place when September 11 occurred.

This study examines what is newsworthy about domestic terrorism.² The proposed framework contends that an effective way to examine media coverage of terrorism, and to assess how this social problem is presented in the news, is to first identify the actuality of terrorism in the United States as a reference point. Consequently, this study was designed to study the coverage of terrorism incidents that occurred on American soil between January 1, 1980 and September 10, 2001. This in-depth analysis and comparison between media coverage and actual incidents provides important insights into the presentation of terrorism in the news media.

The Media's Role in Terrorism

Understanding the choices the media make, including the selection and prominence of presentation of terrorism incidents, has significant consequences for how the public thinks about terrorism, policymakers respond to terrorism, and terrorists attempt to use the media to accomplish their objectives. Before discussing the extant research on media coverage of terrorism, these points are supported below.

Public's Dependency on the News Media

The public relies heavily on news media for information about terrorism (see Altheide, 1987). The accessibility and omnipresence of the media have altered how most Americans learn about the world and how the world works. The importance of the media was demonstrated on September 11. Nacos (2002,

2. We define domestic terrorism incidents in this study as events occurring within the continental United States. Acts committed by domestic or international terrorist groups are included in the analysis.

2003a, 2003b), for example, discusses September 11 as a defining moment in media coverage of terrorism:

More people watched the made-for-television disaster production "Attack on America" live and in replays than any other terrorist incident before. It is likely that the terrorist assaults on New York and Washington and their aftermath were the most watched made-for-television production ever. (Nacos, 2003b, p. 28)

She further argues that the impact of the media on the public generally will increase as the formats for newsmaking continue to move from hard news to infotainment.

Although there is considerable debate among scholars about the influence of the media on public attitudes, most scholars agree the media play some role, and that the media's influence increases as the public's direct experience with a problem decreases (see Bassiouni, 1981; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1982; Curran, Gurevitch, & Woollacott, 1982; Lee, 1990; Slone, 2000; Wanta & Hu, 1993). Thus, the media have a strong potential to influence how the public thinks about social problems like terrorism, especially because most people only experience terrorism through mass-media accounts. Slone's (2000) research is one of very few studies that specifically examine the links between political violence and psychological processes. She argues that most people base their assessment of national security threats on indirect exposure through the media (p. 509). This research also finds that media portrayals of terrorism increase anxiety among the viewing public.

Terrorism is obviously a significant social problem, but not all events are presented to the public, and not all approaches to responding to terrorism are given news coverage. Some events, for example, are ignored, and others are prominently displayed as significant events. Most Americans are likely to be familiar with three or four actual terrorist incidents in the past 25 years that have taken place on US soil—the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, and the 2001 World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. Interestingly, in their annual *Terrorism in the United States* report, the FBI lists over 450 such incidents that have occurred. An examination of the choices media makes helps us understand media priorities by demonstrating what events are minimized or magnified.

Policymakers and the Media

News coverage, moreover, can be an effective communication platform for politicians and other policymakers. In fact, scholars argue that the news media are critical to setting agenda issues of significance and importantly have transformed the structure and meaning of politics and political communication in society (see Altheide, 1991, 2004; Benson, 2004; Castells, 1997). Media technologies impact how politicians discuss solutions to significant social problems. David Altheide's (1991) important work in this area makes just this point:

The mass media formats that increasingly are used to cover events are transforming those events, and are altering the strategies used to promote and evaluate them, as well as how we think of something in need of a new policy.... The news media help shape the activities and significance of events by providing a form. (p. 6)

In addition, due to the news media's reliance on official sources, it is not only the news media that choose what news themes become culturally acceptable. Ericson, Baranek, and Chang (1991) insist news values are largely representative of those social organizations seeking to actively reproduce social order. Likewise, Chermak (Chermak, 2003) argue that political organizations use media coverage to determine what priorities become the public's priorities. These claims-making opportunities not only express popular sentiment, but also seek to transform it in accordance with selective visions of state and society (Beckett, 1997).

Terrorism can be a strategically useful topic for policymakers. Shapiro (2002, p. 76) argues that "an effective media policy has become an integral part of the politics of conflict and an essential element in the international effort of terrorism." For example, Chermak's (2002) analysis demonstrates that after Oklahoma City bomber Tim McVeigh was erroneously tied to the militia movement in 1995, policy makers, key watchdog organizations, and experts used the bombing to propose solutions, to generate support for policy preferences, and to manufacture the militia threat.

Terrorists and the Media

Terrorist acts, such as bombings, kidnappings, assassinations, hijackings, arson, and nuclear threats, can satisfy multiple objectives for terrorists, including the realization of their cause, funding, strengthening morale, recruitment, revenge, liberation of comrades, spreading fear, and publicity (Altheide, 1991; Martin, 1985; Nacos, 2002, 2003a, 2003b). For groups and individuals who think that their concerns are being ignored, terrorism becomes a persuasive vehicle of communication (Clutterbuck, 1982; Martin, 1985; Nacos, 2002) and a mechanism to gain access to the "Triangle of Political Communication" (Nacos, 2002, p. 4). Nacos' (2002, 2003a, 2003b) large body of work in this area stresses how coverage brings status to a terrorist or terrorist group, and it is an opportunity to recruit members and disseminate their ideas. She states: "There is no doubt that their deeds are planned and executed with the mass media and their effects on the masses and governmental decision makers in mind" (Nacos, 2003b, p. 29). Most scholars highlight this symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorists, assuming that terrorists attempt to capitalize on the power of the media, and media need dramatic and sensational events to increase ratings (Clutterbuck, 1982; Devine & Rafalko, 1982; Laqueur, 1977; Martin, 1985; Nacos, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Nelson & Scott, 1992; Picard, 1993; Schmid & de Graaf, 1982; Van Atta, 1998), but some scholars believe that the

relationship between terrorists and the media is overstated due to the lack of systematic evidence of motivations for terrorism (see Dowling, 1989; Wieviorka, 1993).

Media Coverage of Crime Incidents

There is a large body of scholarly work examining the presentation of crime in the media. This body of research documents variations by type of medium, changes in crime coverage over time, the individuals and experts quoted within crime stories, and the major frames used to describe crime, criminal justice, and justice.³ Most of this research relies on content analysis to draw conclusions about the media's contribution to the public's constructed realities about crime. There is an increasingly popular approach to study the presentation of crime, especially among studies focusing on news coverage of homicide. This approach begins by collecting a population of incidents occurring in a specific time frame in a particular jurisdiction and then linking these data to media accounts. Researchers then document what incidents get presented, how much news space is devoted to each incident, and what factors predict selection (whether an event is covered or not) and prominence (placement and amount of coverage—number of articles, words, or minutes broadcasted) (see Chermak & Weiss, 1998; Johnstone, Hawkins, & Michener, 1994; Paulsen, 2003; Peelo, Francis, Soothill, Pearson, & Ackerley, 2004; Sorenson, Peterson, & Berk, 1998). For example, Peelo et al.'s study of press coverage of homicides in England and Wales impressively demonstrates this research approach. They used data available from the Home Office for case-related data on 2,685 homicides that occurred between 1993 and 1996. They then traced the reporting of these homicides in three national newspaper titles. Generally, the results provide a more refined understanding of how the news media distort the reality of homicide. They conclude that only 40 percent of the homicide incidents actually received news coverage, that victim and case-related variables are significantly more important than suspect variables, and that the circumstance of the homicide was the most important predictor of salience.

This approach, which thus far has been applied almost exclusively to homicide, is important because it allows researchers to compare what is presented about a particular crime or social problem to what is ignored. Peelo et al. (2004, p. 256) argue that news accounts must be compared to actual incidents to see whether the "public narrative of homicide" is distorted, and "by systematically charting the nature of reporting distortions, we explore the contribution of newspapers to the social construction of homicide." Sorenson et al. (1998, p. 1514) find that newspaper patterns of homicide do not accurately reflect homicide and homicide risk, and that this disconnect may explain why the public believes violence is increasing, despite statistics indicating crime

3. For a review, see Reiner (1997).

declines. Paulsen (2003) argues that research must compare the media's presentation of homicide with actual homicide incidents to understand the socially constructed realities of homicide. He discusses how most studies focus only on media coverage or compare media coverage to official crime statistics, but few connect incidents with media coverage. Finally, Pritchard and Hughes (1997, p. 50) argue:

Research on journalists' selection processes must go beyond simple analysis of media content ... to analyze events and situations that journalists decided were not newsworthy. Researchers must obtain extramedia data so that they can analyze the universe of possible stories of a given nature before comparing those that are reported in the news with those that were not reported.

Media Coverage of Terrorism

The present study applies this framework to the analysis of terrorism in the media. Most of the research, discussed earlier, has focused on the question of whether and how terrorists' use the media to accomplish strategic and tactical goals. Most scholars are highly critical of media accounts of terrorism, but these criticisms are based primarily on anecdotal data and fewer studies examine what the media actually present about terrorism (Picard, 1993, p. 80). Similar to the general body of literature on media coverage of crime, scholars examining the presentation of terrorism in the news have relied primarily on content analysis of media communication. In this section, first the general findings of research that systematically examined media content about terrorism are highlighted, and second the handful of studies that examine media coverage of actual terrorism incidents are discussed. The extant research has focused on three general areas: the newsworthiness of terrorism, what factors determine whether an incident is covered, and what actually gets presented in news stories of terrorism.

Newsworthiness of Terrorism

Although there are a couple of scholars who conclude that terrorism is rarely presented in the news (see Crelinsten, 1987; Kelly & Mitchell, 1981), most researchers generally agree that international and domestic acts of terrorism are important media events (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1987; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Martin, 1985; Nacos, 2003a, 2003b; Paletz, Ayanian, & Fozzard, 1982; Schmid & de Graaf, 1982; Terry, 1978), but acts of state terrorism are generally ignored (Schmid & de Graaf, 1982; Stohl, 1987). Nacos (2003b, p. 31), for example, concludes,

the contemporary news media, especially television, have customarily devoted huge chunks of their broadcast time and news columns to major and minor acts

of political violence, supporting the media critics' argument that the mass media, as unwitting as they are, facilitate the media-centered terrorist scheme.

Martin (1985), for example, studied media coverage of violence or the threat of violence by a politically oriented group in four foreign and one American newspaper (the *Washington Post*). He concluded that there are, on average, nine terrorism incidents presented per day, but only a very small percentage of stories use the term terrorism to describe political violence. Kern, Just, and Norris (2003, p. 290) conclude that the September 11 attacks were particularly surprising to the American public because media coverage of terrorism had been declining: in the 1980s, US network news covered about four terrorism stories a week but only two per week in the 1990s. Not surprisingly, they also conclude that media coverage of terrorism reached "record levels" following 9/11. The media's tendency is to overemphasize and overdramatize terrorism at the expense of many other important social problems. Iyengar and Kinder (1991), for example, find that the media presented more stories about terrorism than poverty, unemployment, racial equality, and crime. Similarly, since terrorism fits the infotainment frame of current media focus, offering clear villains and heroes, news media will ignore other news and will tend to overemphasize terrorism (Nacos, 2002, p. 4).

Factors Impacting Coverage

Research has also documented some of the factors that explain why terrorism is such a newsworthy topic, and in general, standard criteria of newsworthiness apply (see Traugott & Brader, 2003). Terrorist incidents that harm American citizens abroad or are a threat to American interests are more likely to receive news coverage, although overseas terrorist activity is generally ignored by US news media (Kelly & Mitchell, 1981; Nacos, 2002; Picard, 1993). In fact, scholars argue that an act is more likely to be labeled as terrorism when a US citizen is killed (Nacos, 2002). This research, and several other projects, emphasize that although terrorism is important news, there is considerable variation in the actual amount of newspaper coverage given to certain terrorist incidents (Atwater, 1987; Bassiouni, 1981; Kern, Just, & Norris, 2003; Kupperman & Trent, 1979; Nacos, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Paletz et al., 1982; Picard, 1993). Picard (1993) argues that most incidents are not covered, but those incidents presented in the media are provided massive amounts of attention and "are allowed to consume media time and space out of proportion to their social or political significance" (p. 91). Paletz et al. (1982), for example, examined every story on ABC, NBC, and CBS that discussed the terrorist activities of the IRA, FALN, and the Red Brigade. They concluded that the terrorism of these groups was certainly newsworthy, but most stories about them were very brief. Only high profile events, which usually ended in violence, received significant amounts of coverage. Their analysis indicated that having victims was an

important variable that determined the amount of news coverage (see also Altheide, 1985; Kern et al., 2003; Traugott & Brader, 2003). Nacos (2002) agrees with the conclusion that terrorist acts that result in a significant number of deaths or destruction will yield substantial media coverage, but she also argues that minor acts may also receive coverage, depending on location, target, and group involved. Other scholars concur, concluding that the duration of an incident (hijackings tend to be important because they can last for several days or weeks) and accessibility to a location are important variables (Kelly & Mitchell, 1981; Quester, 1986). Quester (1986), for example, found that the hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* received far less coverage compared to the TWA hijacking because the media could not reach the ship's location at sea.

It is not surprising the research concludes that media emphasize the dramatic, most violent, and conflictual terrorist accounts, and ignores historical, cultural, and social explanations for terrorism (Atwater, 1987; Paletz, Ayanian, & Fozzard, 1985; Picard, 1993; Wurth-Hough, 1983). Paletz et al. (1985) examine the presentation of two European and one domestic terrorist group. They find that one-third of the stories focused primarily on the violence of an incident, government responses and concerns were included in nearly 40 percent of stories, and less than 6 percent of stories discussed goals of these groups or underlying social conditions central to the conflicts. Similarly, Atwater (1987) concludes that background information about terrorist groups is presented in only about 3 percent of network television coverage. Scholars conclude that terrorism is presented in a one-sided fashion, generally supporting extant government policy (Epstein, 1977; Traugott & Brader, 2003). Journalists will even selectively use the term terrorist in a way that corresponds with the interests of the government (Epstein, 1977; Jenkins, 2003) though the opportunity for governments to manufacture understandings about terrorism is mediated by organizational and technological issues (Altheide, 1985, 1987, 1991). Terrorists are often presented as irrational fanatics (Chermak, 2002, 2003; Epstein, 1977).

Media Coverage of Terrorism Incidents

Although most studies examining the media presentation of terrorism have simply reported media images about a particular media event or type of event, or from a general sample of media articles, there have been a few important studies that have looked at coverage of all incidents. Since our study was designed to build specifically on these studies, the methodological approach and the major findings from these studies are discussed below.

First, in a book and several articles, Gabriel Weimann and several colleagues study media coverage of international terrorism committed by nonstate actors (Weimann, 1987; Weimann & Brosius, 1991; Weimann & Winn, 1994). These studies rely on a chronological list of international terrorism acts developed by the RAND Corporation, and examine media coverage of the 2,239 international

terrorism incidents that were in the database that occurred between 1968 and 1980. The media sources examined included three electronic (ABC, CBS, and NBC) and nine print sources. These studies indicate that only a third of international terrorism incidents were presented in both electronic and print media (Weimann & Brosius, 1991; Weimann & Winn, 1994). They find that only 33 percent of all nonstate transnational terrorism incidents are provided coverage, but stories published in the *New York Times* are often exported to the rest of the world (Weimann & Winn, 1994, p. 73). On average, an incident received about 120 seconds of television coverage and two newspaper articles. Among the most important factors determining selection and prominence were: type of acts (kidnappings, hijackings, or hostage taking were the best stories), seriousness of the act (when death or injury occurs), location (acts in the Middle East, usually committed by Palestinian terrorists or directed at Israeli targets), and duration. Negative effects were found when the responsibility for the act was unknown or an act of terrorism was committed in Latin America (Weimann & Brosius, 1991; Weimann & Winn, 1994).

Second, another study focuses similarly on media coverage of international terrorism, but the authors use a different database (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1987). These scholars compare the amount and type of network television coverage of international terrorism that occurred between 1969 and 1980 to terrorist occurrences in a data set called ITERATE (International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events). They find that television networks cover terrorism similarly, but none of the network's coverage parallels the ITERATE data (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1987, p. 53). Although the number of terrorist incidents increased dramatically, the amount of coverage remained about the same over time. International terrorism was covered intensely by the networks in some years, but the topic received only minimum coverage in other years. Similar to the findings discussed above, these researchers find that networks overemphasize terrorism incidents that occurred in North America and the Middle East, but downplayed activities in Latin America. They also find that bombings and political threats are downplayed (compared to their actual occurrence), and hostage situations and hijackings are overemphasized. Interestingly, these scholars conclude that coverage of terrorism against US citizens does not differ from general terrorism coverage, and it does not correspond to changes in the ITERATE database (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1987, p. 57).

Justification and Hypotheses for Present Study

The present study, like the research using the ITERATE and RAND databases, explores media coverage of terrorism incidents starting with a database of actual incidents. Similar to what these researchers were able to do, and like scholars who have used a similar approach to study homicide, this study is able to comment on the characteristics that influence issues of selection (what

incidents received coverage) and prominence (what incidents received significant amounts of coverage). The focus is on those characteristics found to be important in previous research: type of act, seriousness, location, target, tactic, and origin, but our study extends this work in several ways. First, the database of terrorism incidents starts where both studies end (1980) and continues to September 10, 2001. Second, the focus of this study is on media coverage of terrorism within the United States. Most media and terrorism research focuses on international events occurring abroad, and very few studies look at domestic incidents. Third, this study uses multiple measures of media salience. Specifically, which terrorism incidents are covered, how many articles and words are presented about each incident, and media coverage related to specific and general accounts of an incident are examined. This approach not only indicates which factors increase the likelihood of coverage, but opens up a dialogue on how terrorist incidents are used by policymakers and other claimsmakers.

The approach used in this study also provides the opportunity to more completely examine the symbiotic relationship between terrorists and news organizations. The identification of the key variables critical to this relationship furthers our understanding of how media objectives and formats contribute to a very narrow public understanding of terrorism. It also provides some measure of how successful terrorist groups have been in accomplishing publicity goals. Some scholars argue that terrorism would not exist without the mass media, and the success of a terrorist organization depends on the amount of publicity it receives (Devine & Rafalko, 1982; Laqueur, 1977; Martin, 1985; Nacos, 2003b; Nelson & Scott, 1992). Moreover, Nacos introduces the idea of "mass-mediated terrorism" to illustrate the role of the media considerations in the calculus of political violence (Nacos, 2003b, p. 23). Using actual terrorist incidents as a baseline measure, comparing media selection and prominence of terrorist incidents is an important next step in considering the role of media publicity in terrorist activities and terrorism as "mass-mediated action." The variations in the amount of publicity received across incidents may also be an indicator of what groups actually attempt to accomplish objectives using the media. Rather than simply assuming that all terrorists seek publicity, this study provides systematic evidence about which terrorists seek publicity and which may try to avoid it. That is, the desire of achieving media publicity may push certain groups towards certain tactics or strategies. In short, the publicity-seeking terrorist must understand media logic and communication formats to successfully accomplish communication goals.

Applying the existing theoretical and empirical literatures in terrorism and the news media and the literature on newsworthiness generally, we expect that the following characteristics of terrorism incidents to increase the likelihood that an event is selected and prominently presented (see Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Weimann & Winn, 1994). First, we expect the news media to exaggerate the attention given to the most serious terrorist events. An event

must surpass a certain emotional threshold for media workers to consider covering an incident. As homicide is a rare event (relative to other offenses), death by terrorism is very rare and thus an event that will be presented prominently in the news. Second, we also expect the nature of the incident to influence media decision-making. Certain types of terrorist events—those short and intense in duration or an ongoing dramatic incident such as a hijacking—that are consistent with the routines of news production will likely receive much more news coverage. Finally, the relevance of the incident (and the intended targets) will likely increase media salience. Political violence occurs throughout the world with some frequency, but most incidents are ignored because the media believe consumers are not interested—these events are too far removed to be of concern to American news consumers. This study examines only incidents occurring in the United States, but even these incidents are not equally meaningful. Attacks on foreign nationals or installations are likely to be defined by the media as being less important. All else being equal, domestic attacks targeting American interests and US citizens will be more likely to receive some coverage as well as extensive coverage.

Method

This study is concerned with the news coverage of terrorist incidents occurring within the United States from 1980 to September 10, 2001. The analysis is based on a list of terrorist-related incidents and *New York Times* articles pertaining to each incident. Terrorist-related incident data came from both the FBI's *Terrorism in the United States*⁴ annual report and the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) Knowledge Base.⁵ With the two data sources combined, the list consisted of all reported terrorist incidents, suspected incidents, and prevented incidents investigated by the FBI as well as incidents recognized by court documents pertaining to individuals indicted for acts of terrorism for over two decades.⁶ Approximately 25 percent of the incidents were listed in both data sources, while 25 percent were located only in the MIPT database, and the other 50 percent of incidents were located only in the FBI's report. Realizing that defin-

4. *Terrorism in the United States* is a public annual report summarizing suspected, prevented, and completed terrorist incidents investigated by the FBI. (for recent online copies go to www.fbi.gov).

5. The MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base integrates data from the RAND Terrorism Chronology 1968-1997; RAND®-MIPT Terrorism Incident database (1998-Present); Terrorism Indictment database (University of Arkansas & University of Oklahoma); and DFI International's research on terrorist organizations. The RAND and RAND-MIPT databases include information from open-source materials. Terrorist-related incidents located in these databases were analytically useful in showing what types of terrorism were not investigated by the FBI during this time period. Information on terrorist indictments since 1980 is provided by the *American Terrorism Study* being conducted by Brent Smith (University of Arkansas) and Kelley Damphousse (University of Oklahoma). For more information or to access the MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base, go to <http://db.mipt.org/Home.jsp>

6. During the early 1980s, many Cubans hijacked airplanes in an attempt to fly back to Cuba. The location of the incident was coded as the US city in which the plane departed.

ing domestic terrorism is problematic,⁷ this study relies on the FBI's most recent definition of domestic terrorism⁸ allowing the inclusion of all incidents from both data sources that occurred within the United States.

Terrorist-Related Incidents (1980-2001)

The coding of the independent variables is presented in Table 1. There are 412 incidents included in the database constructed for this study. Slightly over 63 percent are completed acts of terrorism, while the rest are either prevented (24.8 percent) or suspected (11.9 percent) incidents.⁹ The outcome variable is binary-coded, resulting in two dummy variables with the suspected incidents variable serving as the reference category. Approximately 40 percent of the incidents occurred in the Northeast, 28 percent in the West, 10 percent in the Midwest, and 22 percent in the South. The region variable is also binary-coded with South serving as the reference category. Seriousness is measured by the number of victims killed in an incident. At least one person was killed in approximately 6 percent of the incidents. Because of the wide variation in number of victims killed (most of the incidents resulted in only one death, but McVeigh murdered 168 people in the Oklahoma City bombing), this variable is also binary-coded with one meaning at least one person was killed in an incident. Fifty-two percent of the incidents involved a domestic group or individual, and 45 percent are of international origin. Zero indicates that the incident was

7. There is considerable scholarly debate on the problems with defining terrorism (see Gibbs, 1989; Silke, 1996; Smith, 1994). Moreover, the FBI has been criticized because their counts exclude certain types of attacks, such as incidents occurring at abortion clinics (Carlson 1995; Wilson & Lynxwiler 1988). We do acknowledge that we are comparing one socially constructed reality of terrorist occurrences to the media's constructed reality. We do, however, still think such a comparison is a valuable contribution to the literature for several reasons. First, the FBI is the leading law-enforcement agency responding to and investigating terrorism. Second, the FBI figures are used by politicians as fact and thus represent an important reality about terrorism, and aspects of that reality are provided to the public in the media. Finally, the FBI and other law-enforcement agencies enjoy special access to news organizations, and research indicates the substantial efforts by these agencies to push specific agendas in the news (Chermak 1995; Chermak & Weiss 2005; Lovall 2001).

8. The FBI defines the scope of domestic terrorism in their 2001 *Terrorism in the United States* annual report. It reads: "Domestic terrorism refers to activities that involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any state; appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States. [18 USC2331(5)]." In effect, the FBI also considers terrorist incidents occurring in Puerto Rico domestic terrorism. Because our analysis was primarily concerned with terrorist incidents within the United States, these cases were excluded from our data.

9. The FBI defines a completed incident as "a violent act or an act dangerous to human life, in violation of the criminal laws of the United States, or of any state, to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives." Their definition for a suspected terrorist incident "is a potential act of terrorism for which responsibility cannot be attributed to a known or suspected group. Assessment of the circumstances surrounding the act determines its inclusion in this category." Finally, the definition for prevention "is a documented instance in which a violent act by a known or suspected terrorist group or individual with the means and a proven propensity for violence is successfully interdicted through investigative activity" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999, p. ii).

attributed to an international source, while a code of one indicates that it was attributed to a domestic source. Approximately 13 percent of the targets were airlines, 27 percent were non-government organizations (NGOs), 30 percent were government installations, 7 percent were private citizens, and 2 percent were other targets. The target variable is coded into four dummy variables: NGOs, government installations, private citizens, and other. Airlines serve as the reference category. Tactic is the last variable in Table 1. The tactic used in the majority of the incidents was a bomb (63.6 percent). Approximately 10 percent were sabotage, 8 percent were hijackings, 6 percent were hostage situations, 4.5 percent involved firearms, and 4 percent were attacks against installations. The tactic variable is coded into six dummy variables, and sabotage serves as the reference category.

News Salience

Keywords and names from terrorist-related incident descriptions were used to search for news coverage in *Proquest's New York Times* Historical Database.¹⁰ The *New York Times* was selected because its coverage is indicative of national media coverage (Winter & Eyal, 1981), thorough (Best, 1990), a reliable indicator of the importance of the issue on the national news agenda (Chermak & Weiss, 1998), and an agenda-setter for other major newspapers and networks (Brown, 1971; Danielian & Reese, 1989). From this data source, each article as it appeared in the newspaper, its word count, and how it was placed in relation to other news stories on the same page were gathered. Because of the two-year lag in the *New York Times'* online archive, *Lexis Nexis* was used to search for references to the terrorist incidents in the database through 2004. Two types of articles were collected. First, were all articles that described and focused specifically on the terrorism incident (referred to as specific-incident articles). The primary criterion to be coded as a specific incident article was that the focus of the article was on describing the who, what, when, and why of the incident through all stages of the justice process. Second, we collected any additional article where an incident was referenced by a reporter (referred to as general-incident articles). Journalists and other claimsmakers use such incidents for a variety of purposes, such as the introduction of a new piece of legislation, as support for a demand for more resources, or to highlight a particular threat. The types of incidents that receive such general coverage provide another way to dissect what about terrorism is newsworthy.

10. In order to be thorough, we would start the search process broadly. For example, if the incident involved a bombing, we would search for "bomb" in articles appearing within 7 days of the date of the incident. We would then search all years of the media databases using names (suspects, aliases, affiliates, attorneys), then group names (Animal Liberation Front, The Order), and then target (victim's name or location). We would also read the articles to identify additional criteria.

Table 1 Frequency and percentage of terrorist incidents by incident type

Variable	N	Percent of all incidents
<i>Outcome</i>		
Completed	261	63.3
Prevented	102	24.8
Suspected ^a	49	11.9
<i>Region</i>		
Northeast	162	39.3
Midwest	41	10.0
West	114	27.7
South ^a	90	21.8
Unknown ^b	5	1.2
<i>Seriousness</i>		
No death ^a	387	93.9
Death	25	6.1
<i>Origin</i>		
Domestic	212	51.5
International ^a	184	44.7
Unknown ^b	16	3.9
<i>Target</i>		
NGO	112	27.2
Government installation	124	30.1
Private citizen	27	6.6
Airline ^a	53	12.9
Other target	8	1.9
Unknown ^b	88	21.4
<i>Tactic</i>		
Bombing	262	63.6
Hijacking	34	8.3
Hostage situation	26	6.3
Firearm	18	4.5
Installations attack	17	4.0
Sabotage ^a	42	10.2
Other target	4	1.0
Unknown ^b	9	2.2

^aReference category. ^bNot included in analysis.

Findings

The findings are presented in three sections. First, an overview of the amount and type of coverage received by these terrorism incidents is presented, and key bivariate relationships are highlighted. Second, logistic regression results showing the variables influencing whether a terrorism incident was covered are presented. Third, multivariate results for the variables influencing the amount of space are presented.

Ignore, Mention, or Magnify

Only 228 of the 412 (55.3 percent) terrorism incidents were presented in the *New York Times*. Although not all terrorism incidents are presented, over 4,000 articles and nearly 3.8 million words were written about the 228 terrorism incidents receiving coverage. Table 2 presents the mean number of articles and words. On average, an incident receives approximately 10 articles and 9,000 words. Forty-eight percent of the articles presented were classified as incident stories—stories describing the facts, circumstances, and response to a specific case. The results also indicate that many terrorism incidents provide opportunities for claimsmakers to promote general policy issues. Fifty-two percent of the articles were classified as general policy stories. Several incidents immediately ignited debate and legislative action regarding what may have been an important but dormant social problem. These incidents also increased the curiosity of media workers about a particular terrorist group. For example, the racist, killing rampage of Benjamin Smith was covered extensively by the media, but it also stimulated media interest in the ideology and tactic of the World Church of the Creator and its leader. When Matthew Hale was investigated, indicted, and put on trial for various charges, reporters again revisited his connection to Smith. An important point about the distortion of these incidents is that the majority of incidents receive little or no coverage. Nearly 85 percent of the incidents received less than five articles, and less than 1,500 total words were written about 70 percent of the incidents.

To make this point more dramatically, Table 3 presents the top 15 most news producing incidents in the sample (incidents that received >15,000 words). These fifteen cases accounted for 79 percent of the total number of articles presented about all incidents, 71 percent of the specific articles, 86 percent of the general articles, 85 percent of the total number of words, 77 percent of the words on specific incidents, and 89 percent of the words on general articles. Most terrorism incidents are either ignored or briefly mentioned by the media, but the public's understanding of terrorism is likely to be dramatically influenced by only a very small number of these most influential cases—the most severe and lasting events. It is also interesting to note that several of these incidents are newsworthy because of their policy-making potential rather than the specific facts about the incident. Approximately 25 percent or less of the total number of articles were

Table 2 Mean number of New York Times articles and words by type of coverage

Coverage type	Mean number per incident	Total
Articles	9.99	4,116
Specific	4.77	1,967
General	5.22	2,149
Words	9,193.90	3,787,888
Specific	3,426.11	1,411,557
General	5,767.79	2,376,331

Table 3 Fifteen most news producing terrorist incidents

Incident	Year	Total articles	Specific articles	General articles	Total words	Specific words	General words
Oklahoma City bombing	1995	1437	764	673	1,450,737	617,342	833,395
WTC bombing	1993	1157	262	895	1,166,440	196,489	969,951
Millenium bombing plot	1999	107	48	59	134,810	33,936	100,874
Olympic Park bombing (Eric Rudolph)	1996	149	106	43	114,326	73,172	41,154
Abortion clinic bombing (Eric Rudolph)	1997	63	31	32	43,885	19,151	24,734
Brooklyn bridge shooting (Rashid Baz)	1994	52	47	5	41,139	35,288	5,851
Freeman standoff	1996	54	51	3	39,058	37,005	2,053
Alan Berg murder	1984	33	14	19	35,750	8,807	26,943
Buford Furrow shootings	1999	37	23	14	33,558	16,143	17,415
New York subway bombing (Ghazi Mazar)	1997	29	27	2	28,497	25,789	2,708
Brinks robbery (Afrikan Freedom Fighters)	1981	23	5	18	27,776	6,812	20,964
Gay bar bombing (Eric Rudolph)	1997	35	2	33	27,753	1,562	26,191
Gordan Kahl shootings	1983	34	12	22	23,007	3,876	19,131
Benjamin Smith shootings	1999	16	5	11	21,747	5,459	16,288
Vail Ski arson case (ELF)	1998	15	2	13	16,886	1,886	15,000

written specifically about the following incidents: the 1993 World Trade Center bombing (intensely revisited after September 11, 2001), ELF's arson of a ski lodge in Aspen, Colorado (usually mentioned as part of the increasing threat of eco-terrorism), the murder of Alan Berg (mentioned in general discussions of attacks committed by Neo-Nazis/Aryan Nations), the apprehension of Gordon Kahl (discussed to highlight problems with law enforcement-fugitive standoffs), the Brinks armed car robbery by the Afrikan Freedom Fighters (discussed as radical Black activism), and the planned millennium bombings (also intensely revisited after 9/11 because of links to Al Qaeda). These incidents were celebrated, however, because of their policy potential. For example, the millennium bombings provided the opportunity to revisit immigration policy and flaws in policing borders. The 1993 World Trade Center attack highlighted a large range of policy gaps and social issues: policing parking garages, automobile searches, access to explosive materials, immigration, religious fundamentalism, international relations, and oil policy.

Table 4 presents the independent variables of interest, how many of these incidents were covered, the number of articles, and the number of words. These results support other research on the factors driving the coverage of terrorism events (see Nacos, 2002; Weimann & Winn, 1994) and hypothesis for this study. Incidents that are culturally relevant to the reader (domestic incidents on US soil compared to international incidents; incidents occurring in the Northeast) and involve casualties or caused considerable damage (terrorism rarely results in death, but these incidents are covered intensely) were more likely to be covered and given more attention. A similar percent of completed and prevented incidents are covered (57 percent and 60 percent, respectively), but significantly more articles and words were written about completed incidents. These results are not surprising when considering that most of the top news producing incidents presented in Table 3 are classified as completed incidents. Hijackings and attacks on airlines are much more likely to receive at least some coverage, but the intensity of coverage measured by the number of articles is less. Hijackings are important news to be covered because they "involve intense personal drama" (Weimann & Winn, 1994, p. 133).

It is also interesting to examine the presentation of terrorism over time in the *New York Times* against changes in the number of actual terrorism incidents. Table 5 shows the numbers of incidents, percent covered, number of articles, and words. The last four columns document year-to-year change (whether there was an increase (+), decrease (-), or the number of incidents remained the same (~)). There are several interesting findings that can be inferred from these data. First, there is incredible variation in the amount of attention given to terrorism incidents in the news over time. Second, terrorism as an important social problem is short-lived. In 1986, for example, over 50 percent of the 18 incidents were covered, and over three articles and nearly 1800 words were written about them. In 1987, however, less than 13 percent of the incidents were covered with only a minimum amount of media attention. Third, in over half of the years (comparing Year 1 to Year 2; Year 2 to Year 3, etc.), the

Table 4 Mean number of articles and words by type of terrorist incident

Incident type	Percent of incidents covered	Mean no. of articles	Mean no. of specific articles	Mean no. of general articles	Mean no. of words	Mean no. of specific words	Mean no. of general words
<i>Outcome</i>							
Completed	57.1	13.61	6.11	7.5	12,704.49	4,475.62	8,228.87
Prevented	59.8	4.21	2.96	1.25	3,451.58	1,862.12	1,589.47
Suspected ^a	36.7	2.73	1.45	1.29	2,448.02	1091.49	1,356.53
<i>Region</i>							
Northeast	72.2	10.84	4.11	6.72	9,930.70	2,912.77	7,017.94
Midwest	41.5	38.12	20.15	17.98	37,869.07	16,038.71	21,830.37
West	44.7	3.78	2.35	1.43	3,264.37	1,400.48	1,863.89
South ^a	47.8	4.07	2.30	1.77	2,826.04	1,360.521	1,465.52
<i>Seriousness</i>							
No death ^a	53.0	2.78	1.69	1.09	2,078.35	1,039.55	1,038.80
Death	94.0	121.60	52.56	69.04	119342.7	40370.08	78972.64
<i>Origin</i>							
Domestic	65.6	11.64	6.49	5.16	10,562.7	4,750.47	5,812.21
International ^a	45.1	8.60	3.05	5.55	8,158.22	2,080.16	6,078.06
<i>Target</i>							
NGO	48.2	14.57	4.15	10.08	13906.98	2911.24	10995.74
Government	69.4	15.09	9.64	6.45	14069.86	6475.31	7594.56
Citizen	85.2	14.19	9.7	4.48	11521.85	6900.70	4621.15
Airline ^a	84.9	2.23	1.34	.89	1240.66	671.38	569.28
Other	37.5	3.88	1.0	2.88	3752.00	913.13	2838.88

Table 4 (Continued)

Incident type	Percent of incidents covered	Mean no. of articles	Mean no. of specific articles	Mean no. of general articles	Mean no. of words	Mean no. of specific words	Mean no. of general words
<i>Tactic</i>							
Bombing	55.0	13.88	6.40	7.47	13,032.14	4,711.46	8,320.68
Hijacking	85.3	1.65	.88	.76	812.15	358.47	453.68
Hostage	53.8	1.00	.65	.35	638.96	344.77	294.19
Firearm	77.8	14.61	8.33	6.28	12,264.83	5,191.33	7,073.50
Installation	52.9	.88	.71	.18	564.88	405.06	159.82
Sabotage ^a	38.1	2.57	1.76	.81	2,187.07	1,270.26	916.81
Other	25.0	1.25	0.00	1.25	1,173.25	.00	1,173.25

^a Reference category.

Table 5 Mean number of articles and words by year

Year	No. of incidents	Percent of incidents covered	No. of articles	No. of words	Percent of			
					No. of incidents	incidents covered	No. of articles	No. of words
					Increase (+) or decrease (–) or stay the same (~) from previous year?			
1980	45	66.7	3.13	1,892.84				
1981	45	53.3	1.89	1,457.42	~	–	–	–
1982	49	63.3	2.98	2,001.65	+	+	+	+
1983	52	55.8	2.29	1,265.48	+	–	–	–
1984	21	81.0	6.24	4,985.81	–	+	+	+
1985	35	68.6	1.6	948.6	+	–	–	+
1986	18	55.6	3.28	1,784.44	–	–	+	–
1987	16	12.5	0.13	51.63	–	–	–	–
1988	12	16.7	1.25	822.25	–	+	+	+
1989	12	58.3	1.17	900.92	~	+	–	+
1990	7	42.9	0.57	221.57	–	–	–	–
1991	6	33.3	1.50	1,096.00	–	–	+	+
1992	4	50.0	1.00	939.50	–	+	–	–
1993	16	18.8	73.44	73,991.50	+	–	+	+
1994	3	33.3	17.33	13,713.00	–	+	–	–
1995	3	100.0	483.67	486,850.00	~	+	+	–
1996	8	87.5	29.25	21,632.50	+	–	–	+
1997	11	90.9	17.45	13,557.64	+	+	–	–
1998	9	22.2	2.67	3,046.67	–	–	–	–
1999	17	47.1	9.94	11,811.82	+	+	+	+
2000	13	38.5	1.38	1,584.69	–	–	–	+
2001	10	60.0	1.6	1,413.70	–	+	+	–

number of incidents and media attention (mentioned by percent covered and number of articles) goes in opposite directions. Incidents may go up, but media coverage decreases. These findings may support Philip Jenkins's (2003, p. 35) important observation about the disconnect between actual incidents and terrorism crisis in the media: even a wave of terrorist attacks does not necessarily guarantee significant media attention.

Is an Incident Worthy of Coverage?

To examine what factors influence whether a terrorism incident is selected for presentation in the news, two logistic regression models were estimated. The logistic coefficient, standard error, significance level, and odds ratios are presented in Table 6. The Region, Type of Group, Seriousness, and Outcome

variables are included in both analyses, and Target and Tactic are presented independently.¹¹ An examination of the chi-square statistics shows that both models are significant ($p < .001$) and that model 1 yielded a pseudo- R^2 of .242, and model 2's pseudo- R^2 was .236.

The results for both models are quite similar. Terrorism incidents occurring in the Northeast are significantly more likely to be covered compared to those in

Table 6 Logistic regression analysis of coverage of terrorist incident types

Variable	Logistic coefficient (B)		Standard error		Odds ratio exp (B)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Incident type</i>						
Completed	.353	-.085	.425	.525	1.423	.919
Prevented	.988*	.144	.476	.598	2.686	1.155
Suspected ^a	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Region</i>						
Northeast	1.148***	1.075**	.354	.422	3.153	2.930
West	-.062	-.288	.366	.406	.940	.750
Midwest	-.715	-1.213**	.514	.554	.489	.297
South ^a	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Origin</i>						
Domestic	1.322***	1.139***	.276	.330	3.751	3.125
International ^a	—	—	—	—	—	—
Death	2.693***	2.274*	.834	.932	14.780	9.715
<i>Target</i>						
NGO	—	-2.497***	—	.540	—	.082
Government	—	-1.687**	—	.537	—	.185
Citizen	—	-.516	—	.760	—	.597
Airline ^a	—	—	—	—	—	—
Other	—	-2.508**	—	1.050	—	.081
<i>Tactic</i>						
Bombing	.533	—	.414	—	1.704	—
Hijacking	3.259***	—	.667	—	26.015	—
Hostage	.667	—	.581	—	1.949	—
Firearm	1.028	—	.770	—	2.794	—
Attack on installations	.991	—	.735	—	2.695	—
Sabotage ^a	—	—	—	—	—	—
Other attack	-.728	—	1.272	—	.483	—
Constant	-2.042***	1.548**	.634	.672	.130	4.700

Note. Model 1: $\chi^2=106.525^{***}$; Cox and Snell .242. Model 2: $\chi^2=84.859^{***}$; Cox and Snell .236.

^aReference category.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

11. The main concern with these two variables is multicollinearity. The airline (target) and hijacking (tactic) variables are strongly correlated ($r = .80$; $p < .01$).

the South. Although the *New York Times* is considered a national outlet, there is considerable location bias reflecting its readership and easier access of reporters to the event location and knowledgeable sources.¹² Domestic incidents are significantly more likely to be covered than international incidents in the US. This confirms the bivariate results indicating a cultural relevance factor. The American-bred terrorist, perhaps because of the perception that domestic incidents are rare, is more newsworthy. International incidents are also less relevant to American news consumers because the targets of these attacks are often diplomats or embassies of other countries and not US targets. Consistent with the presentation of crime and homicide in the news, seriousness of the event, measured here as terrorism with at least one casualty, significantly increases the odds of being covered. Hijackings and incidents involving firearms were significantly more likely to be covered compared to sabotage, and the targets examined, including NGOs and government installations, were significantly less likely to be covered compared to airlines.

Only in Model 1 were prevented incidents significantly more likely to be covered compared to suspected incidents. The result makes sense in that a prevention essentially is good publicity for a law enforcement agency—an event did not occur because of an investigation by law enforcement. Only in Model 2 were the incidents in the Midwest significantly less likely to be covered compared to incidents in the South.

Factors Predicting Story Salience

This study intended not only to examine the factors influencing whether an incident was presented in the news media, but to explore what variables increase the prominence of an incident. Ordinary least-squares regression would normally be an appropriate statistical procedure considering the structure of the dependent variables (e.g., number of words, number of articles), but, as was highlighted earlier, the database includes a number of outlier cases. Extreme data points are a serious threat to least-squares regression (Rousseeuw & Leroy, 1987), and our examination of the plots and other diagnostic procedures available in SPSS confirmed that there are a number of problematic cases.

There are a number of approaches that can be used to deal with influential observations. One way would be to identify the outliers, remove them from the analysis, and run OLS regression without them (e.g., Cook & Weisberg, 1982). This approach is the least desirable for this study because the characteristics of these extreme cases are critical for understanding the news value of terrorism incidents. These outliers might be thought of as the most important terrorism news events in the sample. A second approach would be, instead of using the

12. According to Standard Rate and Data Service figures, the states in the Northeast region (Connecticut, Main, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont) account for 66 percent of the morning circulation of the *New York Times* and 64 percent of the Sunday circulation (Standard Rate and Data Service, 2005).

raw numbers as dependent variables, to calculate a rate. For example, there are six dependent variables to be used for the prominence analysis: total number of articles, specific incident articles, general incident articles, words, specific incident words, and general incident words. Three additional dependent variables were created: total number of words/articles; specific incident words/specific incident articles, and general incident words/general incident articles. Although the latter three dependent variables compressed the dependent variable, diagnostics still indicated that there were several outlier cases. A final approach, which is used here, is to use another estimation procedure that does not use the squared error criterion to fit the regression line.

Robust regression in STATA 12.0 is used to estimate the models presented below. There are a number of excellent accounts that discuss robust regression (Berk, 1990; Hampel, Ronchetti, Rousseeuw, & Stahel, 1986; Rousseeuw & Leroy, 1987; Western, 1995). In short, robust regression uses iteratively reweighted least squares to estimate the regression coefficients and the standard errors. Each observation is weighted by the size of its residual, and large and influential cases receive lower weights. Robust regression then estimates an equation with these weighted observations, uses the residuals to again compute new weights, and then estimates another equation until there are no differences between equations (Western, 1995).

Robust regression was used for the two sets of independent variables (region, seriousness, outcome, origin, tactic; region, seriousness, outcome, origin, target) and the nine dependent variables (total number of articles, specific incident articles, general incident articles, words, specific incident words, general incident words, total number of words/articles; specific incident words/specific incident articles; general incident words/general incident articles). However, the Huber iterations for the models with the general incident dependent variables (general incident articles, general incident words, and general incidents words/general incident articles) did not converge, and so the robust regression results for these models are not presented.¹³ Table 7 presents the results for the other 12 equations.

The results are fairly consistent across the different models and are similar to the logistic regression and bivariate results presented previously. In all of the models, terrorism incidents involving death were more prominently displayed than incidents without casualties (more words and articles, and high average number of words per article). On average, over 7,000 more words and 10 articles were written about incidents involving a death. Domestic terrorism incidents were more prominently presented to the public compared to international terrorism incidents in most of the models (6/12 models). Incidents occurring in

13. We were able to estimate statistical significant models for these variables using ordinary least-squares regression and eliminating the outlier cases. Although as we mentioned earlier this is the least desirable approach for dealing with outliers, it is interesting to note that seriousness and origin were significant predictors in each model. That is, terrorism incidents that resulted in a death and domestic terrorism events received significantly more articles, words, and, on average, a larger number of words per article as general incident stories.

Table 7 (Continued)

Total no. of words/articles	Total no. of articles		Specific articles		Total words		Specific words		Specific words/articles			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Tactic</i>												
Bombing	-.001	-	.137	-	32.741	-	49.554	-	201.545**	-	150.669**	-
Hijacking	1.079***	-	.742***	-	233.851***	-	235.297***	-	378.504***	-	275.022***	-
Hostage	.436	-	.250	-	73.412	-	80.951	-	304.730***	-	106.165	-
Firearm	6.230***	-	.107	-	6921.773***	-	311.078***	-	407.331***	-	308.561***	-
Installations	.194	-	.246	-	85.229	-	63.596	-	164.503	-	128.382	-
Sabotage ^a	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other	-.494	-	-.259	-	-15.130	-	-.174	-	13.272	-	-.724	-
<i>Target</i>												
NGO	-	-.821***	-	-.582***	-	-162.207*	-	-194.529**	-	-154.597*	-	-100.052
Government	-	-.516*	-	-.304**	-	-76.681	-	-88.103	-	-39.493	-	-31.232
Private	-	.332	-	.100	-	-2086.189***	-	-121.454	-	230.077*	-	13.233
Citizen	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Airline ^a	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other	-	-.851	-	-.529	-	-262.847	-	-143.134	-	-186.100	-	-130.013
Constant	.232	1.322***	-.049	.819***	-20.129	327.970**	-39.034	221.932**	-149.317	297.279**	-120.147	197.909*

^aReference category.* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

the Northeast were more prominently presented (8/12 models) compared to incidents in the occurring in the South. Attacks against NGOs, in general, received less news space compared to airline attacks (5/6 of the models), and hijackings received more coverage compared to sabotage in all six tactic models. Incidents involving firearms (5/6 models) and bombings (2/6 models) were more prominently presented compared to incidents involving sabotage.¹⁴

Discussion

The beginning of this article included a discussion of some of the potential ways that the media might impact thinking about terrorism, policy strategies to respond to terrorism, and the work of terrorists themselves. Scholars have generally acknowledged the potentially important role of the media in this area, but the discussion has been incomplete because many questions about media decision-making and content have been ignored. Consider the implications of this research on the nature of the relationship between terrorists and the media. Researchers have probably overstated the overall importance of achieving media publicity for terrorists when balancing the risks and rewards of carrying out an incident. We have no doubt that that some terrorists and terrorist groups consider media publicity as a central and significant variable influencing the tactics, targets, and timing of committing an incident, but far too many incidents go unreported to at least consider the possibility that many terrorists may simply prefer to stay out of the news. Our sample is limited in that we focus on a single national newspaper, and thus it is possible that many more of these incidents were covered in local and regional newspapers. Terrorists may want to achieve local or minimum media coverage instead of making a media impact such as what occurred on September 11 or in Oklahoma City, but this does not seem likely. It is critically important to understand better the relationship between terrorists and the media. It is clear that groups' opinions differ as to whether publicity is important. The importance of this finding is that groups concerned with publicity will choose particular targets and tactics, and groups preferring to remain out of the news will choose very different targets and tactics. Scholars have documented an increase in mass-casualty terrorism but have provided only general explanations for this growth. Certainly, a plausible hypothesis is that a mass-casualty act is the only way for terrorists that want to achieve publicity to be competitive in the ultra-competitive social problems marketplace. Successful terrorist incidents may lead to the publicity desired from the terrorist's perspective as well as satisfy the media's concerns about ratings. Our results support this conclusion: dramatic events (especially those involving death), lengthy events, and those occurring in certain regions or

14. We ran both the logistic and robust regression models for completed incidents only. The findings are very similar to the complete models-death, domestic events, incidents in the Northeast, hijackings or when the target is an airline, and incidents involving firearms are significant predictors. Please contact the authors for the tables including these results.

target specific targets are exaggerated in the news. Importantly, the shift of government resources, the construction of policy, and the efforts by law enforcement to focus on the most media savvy terrorist groups will ultimately result in policy that very well may ignore the activities of potentially dangerous but less media-savvy terrorist groups.

We think that a better understanding of the media's presentation of terrorism would be of equally important value to discussions about agenda-setting and public opinion about terrorism. Research examining how domestic terrorist incidents are presented in the news is crucial to understanding the role of the news media in shaping public and political understandings about this social problem. Whether a terrorist incident is covered and the amount of attention given to it by the media sends cues to the news-consuming public about priorities and concerns. The research presented here is an attempt to move scholarly discussions to consider media accounts of terrorism more systematically. This study builds on other studies in this area in that it is the first to document how domestic and international incidents occurring on US soil are covered in the news and identify their significant characteristics. The study is unique in that it uses an increasingly popular approach to study homicide as a social problem: using a sample of actual incidents as a starting point and then documenting the media's presentation.

The findings help provide an understanding of the important variables influencing the selection and prominence decisions of news personnel when covering terrorism incidents. First, this study shows that most incidents receive little or no coverage in the media. Almost all terrorism incidents, if covered by the media at all, are insignificant news events, but a few account for the vast majority of news space devoted to terrorism. We documented that just 15 incidents accounted for approximately 85 percent of the 4 million words published in the *New York Times*. Some celebrated cases are likely to ignite social and political change, and they are also likely to play a role in how the public comes to evaluate the risk of becoming a victim of terrorism. Media messages are inherently ideological because they help establish public priorities, restrict general awareness about problems, and limit the field of response options (Altheide, 1987, p. 162). As is in the case of how the media cover violent crime like homicide, there are some terrorist events that receive more news media attention than others, and others that did not receive any attention at all. In effect, the media present only a select group of terrorism incidents in the United States. Although it is not surprising that the media emphasize certain events and ignore others considering the general crime and terrorism in the media literature, the present research does highlight the need to more thoroughly examine the role of the media, what gets presented, and why various incidents are ignored in the news.

For example, when newspaper articles about these terrorism incidents were collected, it was clear that incidents were presented in the news in different ways. Many of the terrorism incidents covered would be presented like a typical crime story: highlighting characteristics of the victim, suspect, and crime and the response to it by the criminal justice system. In these stories, reporters would

reference typical crime sources—police officials, usually a representative of a federal agency or some other criminal justice practitioner. Some incidents, however, are inserted into stories about a range of important policy issues—some incidents might be used as opportunities to generate support for specific legislation, make a request for additional resources, justify restructuring organizational priorities, or serve as a reminder that terrorism is a great threat that needs to remain of concern. The aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing provides perhaps the best example of the multitude of policy options that might be linked to a terrorist incident. For example, President Clinton introduced broad sweeping anti-terrorism legislation soon after the bombing, including adding new airline security measures, funds for new technology, and increasing the authority of law enforcement in the investigation of terrorist cases. What is interesting about the findings is that some incidents were also very useful to policymakers and other claimsmakers—used in multiple ways to accomplish different objectives, but that many other incidents, even those that received a fair amount of media publicity, were covered only as incident stories. Thus, many of these incidents were triggering events that invoked a landslide of other social processes: new legislative policies were written and debated, terrorist groups were investigated by criminal officials and experts, and public and private bureaucracies shifted priorities. Another good example of how an incident triggers policymaking and policy discussions is the attacks of September 11. All coverage of terrorism and terrorist incidents is framed and read by the public through a new lens—that which was created by the media following the event. This reality confirms the important role that the media play influencing priorities, understandings, and policies about terrorism. It is important for future research to examine more closely how cases and incidents are used to accomplish various objectives, highlight the characteristics of triggering incidents that are particularly powerful, and examine the different types of issues linked to an incident.

Second, the results highlight several characteristics that consistently increase the newsworthiness of terrorism incidents. The seriousness of the event matters: terrorism resulting in death increases the newsworthiness of an incident. This is consistent with the general body of media research that documents the significance of homicide as an important crime story. Incidents that might strike a familiar chord with readers, as evidenced by the importance of regional convenience and domestic incidents, increase the newsworthiness of an incident as well. Certain targets and tactics also matter: attacks against airlines and hijackings were particularly important. The factors that were found to influence the coverage and significance of these incidents are very much consistent with the extant scholarly research in this area (see Delli Carpini & Williams, 1987; Nacos, 2002, 2003b; Weimann, 1987; Weimann & Brosius, 1991; Weimann & Winn, 1994). This research, which examines the presentation of incidents on US soil and a time period not previously considered, solidifies the conclusions about how terrorism is treated by news organizations in terms of its importance and reasons for presenting this topic to the public. It is interesting that many of the factors identified as being important in the media's coverage of domestic incidents are

consistent with scholars who have written about media coverage of international events (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1987; Weimann, 1987; Weimann & Brosius, 1991; Weimann & Winn, 1994) and with others focusing on terrorism as a strategic communication device (Nacos, 2002, 2003b). Our findings also confirm Altheide's (1991) important conclusion about how mass-media formats transform images of terrorism. The formula that guides general concerns about newsworthiness and news production issues about location and type of media shape the media reality that is constructed in the news about terrorism.

Previous research and the findings from this study have laid important groundwork for understanding the presentation of terrorism in the news, but there are still significant media-related research questions that need to be addressed. First, it is important to examine how the events of September 11 impacted media decision-making about terrorism coverage. Did September 11 increase the importance of all terrorist-related incidents or just incidents tied to foreign groups? Have a higher percentage of incidents been covered since September 11, and how has media interest evolved as time has passed? Second, unraveling what actually is presented about terrorism in the news, both before and after September 11, is important. For example, it is likely that the debate occurring among scholars about the conceptual problems with defining terrorism is also being struggled with by reporters and editors within newsrooms. When does an incident eclipse the terrorism threshold? When should an incident be labeled political violence or criminal activity? When can an individual be labeled a terrorist? The representation of suspected terrorism groups (i.e., right vs. left wing, international vs. domestic), terrorism policies, sources cited within these stories, and the major frameworks to depict terrorism would all be valuable contributions to understanding media coverage of terrorism. Finally, the approach used in this study could be expanded to include other media (television, local/regional newspapers), to examine additional potential independent variables, such as the specific group involved in an incident, characteristics of suspects (especially race), and victims, and to use data from other terrorism databases, such as the American Terrorism Study Database and Pinkerton's Global Intelligence Services.

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